

For forest-dwelling tribal communities, gathering of minor forest products like honey, gooseberry and soapnut has always been an important occupation. With a view to freeing them from the clutches of contractors and middlemen, co-operatives were set up by the government but unfortunately they have become a reincarnation of older forms of tribal oppression, writes SHARACHCHANDRA LELE

Darkness under LAMPS

TWENTY-FIVE years ago, Large-scale Adivasi Multi-Purpose Societies (LAMPS) were launched in Karnataka as "vehicles of tribal development." Today their status is at best one of somnolence and at worst a reincarnation of older forms of tribal oppression. What ails these institutions? And, will recent moves to "reform" them produce the desired results?

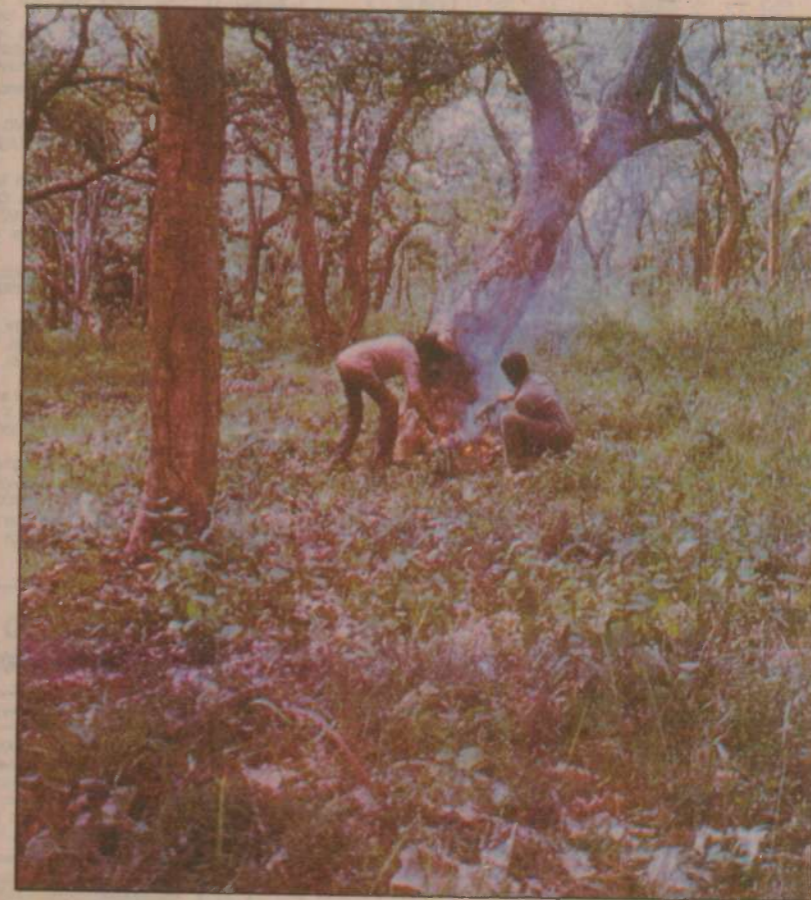
Traditionally, forest-dwelling tribal communities subsisted on shifting cultivation, hunting and gathering of forest produce. These activities and lifestyles were, however, ruthlessly suppressed by the colonial government in the name of forest conservation, but actually to further its own economic and political objectives.

After Independence

In the post-Independence period, modernisation activities such as dam construction and mining on the one hand, and the moves for wildlife conservation initiated in the 1970s on the other, have caused further dislocation.

Sidestepping the debate on "preservation versus assimilation" of tribal cultures, the central and state governments have focused on helping tribals make the transition to a market economy. Gathering minor forest products (MFPs) such as honey, gooseberry, soapnuts, lichen and so on was always an important occupation of the forest-dwellers, but they were at the mercy of middlemen and contractors. So the idea of setting up cooperative societies that would have sole collection and marketing rights on MFPs was born. Making these societies also serve as channels for rationed goods and as credit unions seemed a logical extension. Since tribals were largely illiterate at that time, the secretary for each society was provided by the Department of Co-operative Societies (DCS).

The first LAMPS was set up in Karnataka in 1971 at Hunsur, and five more were set up in Mysore district during 1982-83. There are now 20 societies in Karnataka.



Tribals going in a group to the forest to collect minor forest produce (left) and preparation for honey collection

K S Murali

On the whole, the performance of these LAMPS has been far from satisfactory. In 1993-94, only six (of the then 19) LAMPS showed a profit, and even these reported accumulated losses from previous years. Indeed, they are surviving only on governmental largesse. A total of about Rs 300 lakh has so far been pumped into LAMPS in Karnataka in the form of contributions to share capital, managerial subsidies, loss and

Even if one does not grudge such subsidies to tribal communities, the fact is that financial gains to the tribals have been small. The fraction of the final sale price received by the MFP collectors is still low, typically 25 per cent or less. Often, the prices offered by freelancing purchasers are better than those offered by LAMPS. Uncertainties regarding whether, when, and how much of a product will be purchased by LAMPS

LAMPS themselves.

In fact, in many places LAMPS are simply new forms of tribal exploitation. "Mismanagement" is only a euphemism for the siphoning off of profits by the educated (non-tribal) secretaries, usually with the connivance of the MFP contractors. In Kollegal, for instance, the MFP contractors simply pay LAMPS a certain commission, and then extract the products using the tribal collectors as their agents. In other places, presidents, directors and agents have

little control, and often themselves become collaborators in this exploitation. Tribal communities are thus becoming more differentiated, with these blessed few even acting as moneylenders to the unlucky rest.

Umpteen meetings

Umpteen official meetings have been convened and committees constituted to study the situation. The reports tread the narrow path of techno-

cratic thinking: not enough working capital, not enough pooling of MFPs, not enough diversification of activities, absence of value addition, need for more concessional credit and so on. Sometimes mention is made of MFP leases being given to non-tribals or lease amounts being too high or areas of collection shrinking. Remedies are suggested, minutes taken, but nothing seems to have happened. The tribals are left to fend for themselves. These remedies are doomed to failure

unless one addresses the fundamental issues facing LAMPS, which are threefold. Firstly, LAMPS are locked in a patron-client relationship with the government, specifically the DCS. While excessive bureaucratic control and meddling plagues the whole co-operative movement in India, the problem is particularly severe in LAMPS, where somebody from the DCS is permanently deputed as secretary to manage affairs on the behalf of the "poor, uneducated" tribals. These secretaries thus have a vested interest in keeping the tribals ignorant and incapable. Throwing more money at LAMPS is then a departmentally convenient and individually profitable remedy.

Limited rights

Secondly, although the primary function of LAMPS is marketing of MFPs, and MFPs are today the major source of income for most tribal communities, these communities have very limited "rights" over the MFP-producing resource, that is the forest. LAMPS are given rights to extract MFPs from certain forest areas on a "two-year" lease. The Karnataka Forest Department (KFD) decides whether, when and at what royalty rate the lease is to be renewed, for which products, and in which areas. Every two years, the tribals have to run from pillar to post to get this lease renewed — in 1995, renewal took six months. And finally, KFD personnel in the field decide when and how much harvesting can take place, and demand bribes for issuing transportation permits. This is in stark contrast to all the other primary marketing cooperatives, be they sugarcane, areca or milk, where the producer "owns" the basic productive resource (land or animal). The KFD's claim that this is done to safeguard the forests sounds hollow, when it has given 10,000 hectares on a long-term lease to Mysore Paper Mills.

Thirdly, the tribals have failed, or rather have not been allowed, to emancipate themselves to run the societies as their own. The tribals are left to fend for themselves.

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and their general unfamiliarity with running commercial enterprises, the organisation of LAMPS as one-per-taluk makes it physically impossible for most members to remain informed, let alone involved. Instead, there is the retrogressive institution of LAMPS "agents": tribals who arrange for MFP collection and payment in each podu (village), and who have become commission agents and money-lenders, scuttling the basic concept of a "cooperative".

No understanding

Unfortunately, recent moves by the government to address the problems of LAMPS reflect little understanding of these fundamental problems. A meeting convened in April 1995 by the Principal Chief Conservator of Forests (to which representatives of neither tribals nor NGOs were invited) decided that all LAMPS should have the local Divisional and Range Forest Officers as ex-officio Presi-

dent and Secretary respectively. While such a situation would no doubt ensure smoother liaison between the KFD and LAMPS, it is not only impractical but also highly retrograde in terms of tribal development and empowerment: they now lose control even of the presidentship of their own societies.

Remedies

What is needed instead is the simultaneous implementation of (1) a phased withdrawal of the DCS from the management of LAMPS in particular, and of governmental patronage and meddling in general, (2) an immediate focus on MFP extraction and marketing rather than the umpteen credit and other activities dreamed up by bureaucrats, (3) a reorganisation of LAMPS into smaller village-level units, (4) granting long-term free leases for MFP extraction and forest management to LAMPS and (5) a grassroot-level programme to get tribals motivat-

ed and trained to manage LAMPS as not only a commercially viable but also genuinely cooperative and ecologically sustainable enterprise.

These changes are not as far-fetched as they seem. The government's budgetary crisis makes it imperative that LAMPS become self-sufficient anyway. The forests in Karnataka today are still rich enough in MFPs to ensure financial viability of LAMPS. The KFD's Joint Forest Planning and Management Programme already provides the enabling framework within which villagers can participate in the protection and sustainable harvest of products from reserve forests.

Centre's stand

The Central Government, on the other hand, is seriously considering modifying the Wildlife Conservation Act of 1982 to allow such joint management in sanctuaries and national parks as well.

On their part, tribal communities now have a large number of educated youths, who could, with help from local NGOs, take on such a responsibility. And having campaigned for implementation of the Bhuriya Committee Report on tribal self-government, tribal communities should be willing to take up the challenge of governing at least their own societies and forests properly.

The Soligas

In fact, the Soliga community in the Biligirirangana Hills of Mysore district has, with help from the Vivekananda Girijana Kalyana Kendra, a local NGO, and researchers from Tata Energy Research Institute, already initiated efforts to improve the economic performance of their LAMPS while ensuring biologically sustainable extraction. Thus the opportunities are there, and if grasped by all hands, LAMPS can indeed become beacons of eco-social development.



A Soliga youth plucking noll fruits